

Book Group Reader's Guide

Some background on the gay mystery

Mahu follows in the footsteps of dozens of previous novels featuring gay and lesbian detectives. In fact, there are so many that Neil Plakcy has only focused his own reading and research on mysteries with gay male detectives; there are an equal number of lesbian detectives. He has assembled lists of authors and titles at his website, <http://www.mahubooks.com>; here is some brief background on the genre.

According to gltq.com, an online dictionary of gay and lesbian topics, "Between the 1930s and the 1960s, gay males occasionally appeared in British and American mystery fiction, but they were largely relegated to minor roles as either villains or victims, and their lives were invariably pictured as bleak and unfulfilled... The first appearance of a gay detective in a mystery novel published by a mainstream press occurred in 1966, when George Baxt, then at the beginning of what was to become a prolific career in the crime novel, published *A Queer Kind of Death*, inaugurating a trilogy that was completed with *Swing Low, Sweet Harriet* (1967) and *Topsy and Evil* (1968)."

The online resource continues, "Shortly after [the] Stonewall [riots, the first organized protest by gay men against police and social repression], a new kind of gay detective novel appeared in Joseph Hansen's *Fadeout* (1970), the first in a series of twelve novels and two short stories... For the first time in the crime genre, Hansen presented gay men and lesbians in all their variety, without sensation, as simply men and women with understandable desires, triumphs, and frustrations.

"Hansen's detective is Dave Brandstetter, a handsome gay male who, in the course of the twenty-one-year series, progresses naturally from middle to old age. In the first four novels he is a claims investigator for a large West Coast insurance company run by his father, and in the last eight he is a freelance detective.

“The critical and commercial success of Hansen's Brandstetter novels paved the way for mainstream gay-positive detective fiction, and in the last two decades of the twentieth century several single novels and series of novels that feature gay males as detectives have been issued by major publishers. Most of the series fail to measure up to the high standard of the Hansen novels, but many provide considerable entertainment, and one--by Michael Nava--is a major achievement, consisting of seven mysteries, the last five of which are in fact excellent novels regardless of genre.

“The mystery novel is a logical and appropriate vehicle for gay writers, especially in the United States. Beginning with the hard-boiled school in the 1920s, its politics have often been radical and it has been a mirror of social change. It has a tradition of pitting the outlaw against the establishment and, eventually, of redefining society in such a way that the outsider can find a useful and secure place within it.

“The gay mystery novel, like its straight counterpart, is multifaceted, ranging from often bumbling amateur sleuthing to shrewdly observed police procedurals, from light escapism to the serious study of character. But in all of its manifestations, it serves as an important step toward the integration of gays into the American social fabric as human beings worthy of interest, compassion, and respect.”

Discussion question 1: What elements do you think are most important in a mystery? Here are some of the standard elements readers consider in mysteries:

- ❖ Plot
- ❖ Character development
- ❖ Sense of place
- ❖ Narrative voice

- ❖ Placement of clues (i.e. the ability of the reader to figure out whodunit on his/her own)

How do you think *Mahu* holds up as a mystery? In which of these is the book strongest, and in which weakest?

Narrator and voice

Discussion question 2: What do you think of Kimo as a first-person narrator?

Do you find him believable in light of your own experiences and in the way he is presented? One reader commented that her impression of Hawaiian men was that they were all fat, like Chin Ho on *Hawaii Five-O*. Other readers may have stereotypical ideas about the behavior or attitudes of gay men that may conflict with Kimo's somewhat more macho presentation (as an athlete and a police officer).

Setting

As a narrator, Kimo is keenly aware of the way that tourists view the picture-postcard prettiness of his island—and the irony of investigating deadly crimes in such a setting. While responding to the call from dispatch to report to the Rod and Reel Club to investigate the discovery of Tommy Pang's body, he says, "It was going to be a great day for the beach, a tourist office poster kind of day, full of thong bikinis, surfboards and palm trees swaying in a gentle breeze. Oh, and murder, too."

Discussion question 3: How do you feel these two elements come together?

Though both *Hawaii Five-O* and *Magnum PI* were successful crime programs set in Honolulu, there is little in the way of crime fiction set in the islands. Is a mystery (or any kind of novel) more interesting because it is set in an exotic location? How about the multi-cultural nature of the island community—does that add to your enjoyment? Why or why not?

Kimo and his family

In an introduction before a reading at New York City's Partners in Crime

bookstore, the bookseller mentioned she was particularly intrigued by the patterns of fathers and sons in the book. The first relationship is between Kimo and his father, Al. Kimo moves from fear of his father's rejection to acceptance of his father's love; Al's initial ignorance is balanced by his love. (Kimo even mentions his father on the first page of the book, underscoring that connection.)

The second relationship is between Al's friend Chin Suk, whom Kimo calls "Uncle Chin," and his sons: his legitimate son, Robert, who died of a drug overdose as a young man, and his illegitimate son, Tommy Pang, whom he brought to the US from Hong Kong to take Robert's place. There's also Tommy's relationship with his gay son, Derek. Finally, there is the relationship between the cop Evan Gonsalves and his son Danny. Evan's wife Terri is certain that he could not have committed suicide because of the effect it would have had on Danny. Plakcy has noted that in an earlier draft of the novel, Kimo is able to implicate Evan by discovering a unique pog (a paper bottle cap flipped in a game by Hawaiian kids) which Evan took from a crime scene and gave to his son.

Discussion question 4: How are the relationships different? Why do you think Derek and Wayne kill Tommy—because Tommy disapproves of their sexuality (even though Tommy owns a gay bar) or in order to take over his criminal activities? Is a criminal tendency something that passes from father to son – Chin to Tommy to Derek — like eye color or a love of NASCAR racing?

What reviewers have said

Robert Urban, a reviewer for the gay website AfterElton.com, wrote in his review: "*Mahu* is a tale told with old-fashioned, square-jawed masculine values. The book's male law enforcement officials are the kind that haul off and punch someone who's insulted them. Its detective partners engage in all the typical, low-key male bonding rituals, such as going to cheap diners for coffee, stopping at bars for a drink,

and always being on the lookout for women (who in the archetype of this book's style would probably be referred to as "dames" or "broads").

"In the men of *Mahu*, I was even reminded of Jack Webb's "Joe Friday" character in the old 1950s TV police drama *Dragnet*. The book follows that kind of documentary style deadpan narration and ho-hum attention to the details of police work. There are the leads that turn into unglamorous dead-ends and the many mundane interruptions of private lives that plague policemen, and in classic style, it all leads up to the final shoot-out and capture of a criminal."

Discussion question 5: Do you agree with this evaluation of the book's style? How did you feel about the way the book's police elements were presented? Does the book remind you of Joe Friday's "just the facts" style? Did you expect more *CSI*-type presentation of evidence and procedures?